

July 31, 2000: CIRF Urges Laos, N. Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 31, 2000Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote Friday, July 28 to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, recommending that Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan be listed as "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission further concluded that Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Sudan, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan should be kept on the list, which the State Department will release in September. The Commission also recommended that the Department closely monitor religious freedom in India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. It also noted deep concerns about religious violence in Indonesia and Nigeria. The text of the letter follows below:

Dear Madam Secretary: In its first year of operations, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has investigated violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by governments of a number of countries, using information from victims, religious groups and other private organizations, the United States government, and others. Although it continues to be denied access to embassy cable traffic, the Commission has carefully reviewed the Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom -- 1999 and its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices -- 1999. Based on this information, the Commission concludes that the governments of Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan have engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and therefore recommends that the President designate these four countries as "countries of particular concern" ("CPCs"), for purposes of Section 402(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 ("IRFA") [22 U.S.C. § 6442(b)]. (See footnote.)

In Laos, during the last 12 months, increasing numbers of Protestants, Baha'is and Catholics have been subjected to detention, arrest and harassment, and over 50 persons have been reportedly imprisoned for the peaceful practice of their faith. In North Korea, notwithstanding the difficulty of obtaining reliable information on conditions in the country, it is apparent that religious freedom is non-existent. The government has imprisoned religious believers and suppresses all organized religious activity except that which serves the interests of the state. Not to identify this repressive government as a CPC would effectively reward it for suffocating free speech, press and travel so thoroughly that information on religious persecution is limited. In Saudi Arabia, the government brazenly denies religious freedom and vigorously enforces its prohibition against all forms of public religious expression other than that of Wahabi Muslims. Numerous Christians and Shi'a Muslims continue to be detained, imprisoned and deported. As the Department's 1999 Annual Report bluntly summarized: "Freedom of religion does not exist." In Turkmenistan, where the ruling regime is reminiscent of Stalin's, only the official Soviet-era Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church are recognized by the state as legal religious communities. Members of unregistered communities -- including Baha'is, Christians, Hare Krishnas, and Muslims operating independently of the Sunni Muslim Board -- have been reportedly detained, imprisoned, deported, harassed, fined, and have had their services disrupted, congregations dispersed, religious literature confiscated, and places of worship destroyed. The Commission further concludes that all of the seven governments or entities named by the President last October as CPCs -- Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Sudan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan -- continue to engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and therefore should continue to be designated as CPCs. The Commission also notes grave violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments of India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The actions of the governments of these countries may not meet the statutory threshold necessary for designation as CPCs. Nevertheless, the Commission notes that under IRFA, the President must take action (or issue a waiver of the requirement to take such action) with regard to all countries the government of which engages in or tolerates violations of religious freedom (and not only CPCs) [Sec. 401(b)(1), 22 U.S.C. 6441(b)(1)]. Because of the seriousness of the violations in these four countries, the Commission urges the Department to closely monitor religious freedom in these countries during the upcoming year, and to respond vigorously to further violations there (including CPC designation later in the year, if appropriate).

In India, the central government appears unable (and possibly unwilling) to control growing violence by self-proclaimed Hindu nationalists targeting religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. Priests and missionaries have been murdered, nuns assaulted, churches bombed, and converts intimidated in scores of violent incidents over the past year. In Pakistan, large numbers of Sunni Muslims, Ahmadis and Christians have been harassed, detained, and imprisoned on account of their religion under laws that prohibit blasphemy and essentially criminalize adherence to the Ahmadi faith. In April of this year, the military government abandoned its expressed intent to soften the blasphemy laws. In Uzbekistan, scores of Muslims worshipping independently of the state-controlled Muslim organization have been detained on account of their religious piety. Several religious leaders -- including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelical Christians -- have apparently disappeared under mysterious circumstances, died from mistreatment in custody, or have received long prison terms. In Vietnam, the law provides for the extensive regulation of religious organizations by the state, and leaders and members of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Hoa Hao sect of Buddhism, the Cao Dai religion, as well as Protestants and Catholics have been detained without charge, imprisoned, heavily fined, harassed, or subject to government surveillance. The Commission is also deeply concerned about the violence between members of different religious communities in Indonesia and Nigeria. In Indonesia, current communal violence in the Maluku region has reportedly claimed the lives of 4,000 Christians and Muslims since January 1999, and there is evidence that the Indonesian government is not controlling its armed forces, resulting in murder, forced mass resettlement, and torture. In Nigeria, disputes surrounding the actual and proposed enactment of elements of Islamic law into the criminal codes of

many states in the northern part of the country have sparked a cycle of violence between Muslims and Christians in many parts of the country. The Commission recommends that the United States urge the Indonesian and Nigerian governments to do all they can to prevent further violence and bring the perpetrators of such violence to justice. Thank you, Madam Secretary, for considering the Commission's recommendations. Respectfully yours, Elliott Abrams

Chairman Footnote: Commissioner John Bolton voted "no" on the vote to include Saudi Arabia, and Commissioner Laila Al-Marayati abstained. Commissioner Michael Young, joined by Commissioner Nina Shea, states: "Because I am convinced that the government of India tolerates particularly severe violations of religious freedom, I dissent from the Commission majority's decision not to recommend that the President designate India a 'country of particular concern' under section 402 of the International Religious Freedom Act (22 U.S.C. 6442(b))." Reliable reports from the media as well as religious and secular human rights groups in India portray a marked and lethal increase in violence against religious minorities in the past year. Christian converts, missionaries and clerics have suffered over forty violent assaults in the past year, including murder, rape, and church bombings. Officials are slow to investigate and even slower to prosecute when the alleged perpetrators are Hindu and the victim is not. This violence is fomented, if not commissioned, by strident Hindu nationalist organizations from which the Vajpayee Government refuses to distance itself; indeed, its complacency has implicitly sent a message that federal authorities will do little to stop attacks on non-Hindus or interfere with state laws that intimidate Christian evangelism (e.g., among Dalits). "IRFA dictates that the President 'shall designate each country the government of which has engaged in or tolerated [severe violations] as a country of particular concern for religious freedom.' Unfortunately, this certainly describes India during the past year, and thus it should be so designated. Accordingly, I dissent from the Commission."

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director